

**Waking Up in the Yard of Religion**  
**I John 4:7-11**  
**First Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**January 11, 2009**

*“We love because he first loved us.” I John 4:19*

*“I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew  
He moved my soul to seek him, seeking me.  
It was not I that found, O Savior true;  
No, I was found of thee.”  
UM Hymnal, 341*

“Jesus loves me, this I know.” Is there a simpler or more profound statement than that? Of all the things I have ever learned about God, that was probably the first. That might have even been the first song I ever sung—that or “Happy Birthday to You.” But as simple as it is, as simple as it sounds, I have always struggled with just what it meant. How come Jesus loves me? How could Jesus love me? How does Jesus love me? And how can I know that Jesus loves me? If I have read my history right, I’m not the only one who has asked those questions. It seems people have been looking for answers for a long time. Perhaps you are looking for answers, too. I found mine in what can only be described as a most unusual way. To this day, I am still not sure what to make of it. Was it just a dream or did it really happen? It seemed so real. It seemed just as real to me as you do. Well, perhaps the best thing to do is to let you decide. I’ll tell you the story, and then you can make a decision for yourself. In order to do that, however, you will have to let your imagination run free. Ready?

To say that I was shocked to find myself in a place that I did not know would be an understatement. Not only did I not have any idea where I was, neither did I have the slightest idea how I got there. It seems as if I had just woke up and found myself in the middle of this rather large yard, full of green grass, sturdy trees that stretched out its branches to provide a most comforting shade, and flowers that set off a veritable riot of colors. One of the trees held a tire swing. Cutting through the yard was an old flagstone walkway that ended at a house that seemed to beckon me to come in. It was of timber frame construction with rough-hewn planks, setting on a stone foundation, with huge stone fireplaces on both sides. Judging from the way the planks were weathered, the

house had to be at least 100 years old. Stretching across the front and extending to both fireplaces was a covered porch with honeysuckle vines growing freely on one side. And in the middle of front of the house there was a large oak door. It was so inviting and I remember having this very strong desire to go in and look around, but I figured that it would probably be a good thing to first find out how I ended up here in this beautiful, but unfamiliar place. After all, last time I remember, I was sitting comfortably in my old La-Z-Boy, watching a football game. How in the world did I get here?

It was just about that time that I saw someone emerge from the house and begin walking toward me. He looked to be middle age, and was wearing blue jeans, work boots, and an old black Jimmy Buffet Parrothead tee shirt. His dark curly hair and beard, speckled with gray, framed a weathered face. A kind smile broke out as he neared me, and he stuck out his hand to greet me, looking as if he had known me all of my life. As we shook hands, I noticed that his were hardened by years of hard work, and that there were strange scars on his wrists. For reasons I could not understand, I felt totally comfortable around this stranger. Obviously, my mind was filled with all kinds of questions, but the only ones that managed to spill out of my mouth were, “Where am I?” and “How did I get here?” And it was at that point that a long and very interesting conversation began.

“You don’t know how you got here?” he smiled as he invited me to sit with him on the grass. I almost said something smart aleck like “Well, if I knew I wouldn’t be asking, would I?” but there was something about his face that told me that statements like that really didn’t need to be made. I sensed that I would find out in time. So I simply settled on the lawn and let him respond. And boy, did he ever respond. “Why, you’re in the yard of religion. At least that is what you Methodists like to call it. You have been traveling here your whole life! Don’t you remember your journey?” My face must have looked a bit more clueless than usual, because he just continued to smile. He paused for a moment and then said, “The journey that brought you here began long before you were born, even as you were being knit together in your mother’s womb, but it really took off when you, your parents, your pastor, and I got together that Sunday morning in the

sanctuary, down in front of the baptismal font. That seems to be where most journeys like this begin.”

Now I had heard about that event. It seems that a few months after I was born some preacher named Dr. E. Wesley Perry placed his hairy wet hand upon my head one Sunday morning. From what I have been told, I really didn't like it when he did and cried out quite loudly when it happened, but—by all accounts—I was so cute that no one really minded. It happened at the old downtown First Methodist Church that burned to the ground just a few months later. Somewhere I have a certificate that says...hey, wait a minute! Hold on! I looked over at the one sitting next to me. “You said, ‘you, your parents, your pastor, and I gathered...’” But before I could even finish the sentence, he went on, talking about Miss Gideon. While all I have are vague images stored in the back rooms of my mind, I do remember her. How can you forget anyone with a name like that! It seems that she taught generations of preschoolers at that church, and I heard some of my first Bible stories from her. And somewhere, amidst my collection of life treasures, I have this little tiny white book she gave me, about an inch square, filled with several pages of scripture verses. How in the world did he know about Miss Gideon?

“Do you remember the day you had your tonsils taken out?” he asked. Oh wow, do I ever. In no time the memories started to wash over me. We had gone down to old St. Joseph's Hospital, when it was down on South 10<sup>th</sup> Street. I'll never forget it. My mom and dad had bribed me with promises of all the ice cream I could eat and a toy tin airplane. It seemed like a pretty good deal at the time. But then the nuns came to wheel me down to the operating room. They didn't tell me about the nuns. Back then they still wore those big black habits that draped from the top of their heads all the way down to their feet. I can remember as if it was yesterday being wheeled down the hall with those two nuns on either side of the gurney. Being only 5 years old, I thought they looked like ghosts. Was I ever scared! But even though my parents had to stay behind in the room, I very distinctly remember feeling like I was not alone. “No, you weren't,” he said, seemingly reading my thoughts.

I was a rather shaken by those words, but before I could say anything, he went on, sharing a plethora of names and places. How in the world could he have known all of them? We reminisced about my dad quizzing me on science and scripture, about that time my mom was in the hospital for so long, about youth group, church camp, and my old high school track coach. He also called to mind one particular event, the thought of which still makes me squirm. I had picked up a beautiful young lady one evening, and we had some big plans, very big plans. We were driving to our destination when, for reasons that I've never been able to figure out, I turned down the exact same street on which my grandmother lived. As we drove down that street, I instinctively turned my head when we passed by her house and looked in the front window. There, sitting in the chair right by the furnace vent like she always did, sat grandma. Now while I always loved my grandma, she was not who I really wanted or needed to see at that moment. As I continued to drive it seemed like every moral lesson she ever taught me started washing over me. It just wasn't any fair. I never did tell my date what happened or why I turned around and, just a few blocks later, took her home.

I looked over at my new friend. He was doubled up and holding his stomach in laughter, like he had been in on the joke all along. "Did you have something to do with that?" I asked tentatively, not really know what I was asking. "Oh no, that one was all on you. Life doesn't work that way. But I did use it to bring you to this place." My face must have looked puzzled once again, so he gathered himself and continued. "Look, your friend, John Wesley, would have called that and all the rest of those other memories we have shared 'prevenient grace.' It's an old fashioned term that he often used to remind that young group of Methodists that God had sought them out even before they had even thought about seeking God out. Brother Wesley referred to prevenient grace as 'the grace that comes before,' meaning that God's love is active and working before people were even aware of it. How did my old friend the fisherman put it: 'We love because he first loved us.' Wesley also described prevenient grace as the activity of the Holy Spirit in people's lives; as the way the Spirit used the various events of people's lives to move them to the place where you are sitting right now!"

Once again, my face must have looked totally confused, so my new friend decided to try another tack. “Let me see if I could put it a bit more simply. As he looked back on his own life, Wesley was able to see how all of its twists and turns lead him to the very same spot that you are sitting right now. He remembered his mother Susanna and how she taught him the faith by her words and example, how he was rescued from the fire at his father’s parsonage when he was 6 and told that he must have been saved for something special, his time in the Holy Club when he and his brother Charles tried their best to live faithful lives, the first church he served and all the difficulties that it contained, and, of course, that rather disastrous missionary trip to Georgia. By the way, did he ever blow it with his Georgia peach of a girlfriend or what? Well anyway, after that night on Aldersgate Street, he looked back and realized that everything he had been through, everything he had done, everything he had seen, had prepared him for that moment when—how did he put it—‘my heart was strangely warmed.’ He realized that just like a gardener works the soil before planting the seed, so the Spirit had been working his heart in and through the events of his life. That is how he found himself sitting in the yard of religion. That’s how you find yourself sitting in the yard of religion. Are you beginning to understand?”

“Well, sort of,” I replied, unwilling to admit that I was still a bit confused. “Then let’s go back to the Bible. You do use it for more than a paperweight, don’t you?” I think I nodded my head. “You probably recall that after Adam and Eve discovered that fig leaves could be a bit scratchy, they hid behind the bushes, hoping not to be seen, right? Tell me, if you can, who was it that came looking for them in the cool of the afternoon? By the way, this is like a children’s sermon question.” “Well, if that’s the case,” I laughed, “then the answer has to be God.” “Very good. Now answer me this.” he said, “When Moses fled to Midian after killing that Egyptian, and hid out among his father-in-law’s flocks hoping not to be discovered, who was it that came looking for him?” “God again,” I said. “And when Gideon hid in the wine press, when Elijah tried hiding in the cave, or even when Paul—for all intents and purposes—was hiding on that Damascus Road, who was it that came looking for every single one of them?” This time he didn’t even wait for my answer. “You see, everyone thinks that the Holy Scripture is the story

of people seeking out God, but it is really the other way around. Holy Scripture is the story of God seeking out people—most of the time before those people even knew they were being sought out. So much of scripture is nothing more than the story of what your John Wesley liked to call ‘prevenient grace.’”

I leaned back on my elbows and looked up into the tree under which we were sitting, trying to take in everything he had just said, and then he continued. “Your journey has always been your journey. Just like that time you turned onto your grandmother’s street and looked into her window—that was your choice. But during all that time and in all those choices, you have never been alone. Neither has anyone else. And all of those things that have happened to you have been used to get you to this very place.” I tried to let what he said sink in. It was beginning to make sense. This prevenient grace thing seems not only to be “the grace that comes before,” but also the grace that leads—the way God works in our lives to move us ever closer to God. Closer to God? Was that where I was? Was that who he was? In a Jimmy Buffett tee shirt? I wanted to ask the question that I really wanted to ask, but instead I surprised myself by going back to something we had just talked about: “Now wait a minute. If the Spirit is working in my life, then I assume that the Spirit is working in everyone’s life. No one is ever alone, right? Now I’ll admit that I’m a nice guy, but nice guys are a dime a dozen! So why then isn’t everyone sitting in the yard with you and me?” Without even missing a beat, he said, “Because I have given everyone the freedom to decide for themselves if they want to come here. Love is only truly free, you see, when you have a choice.”

Well, we reminisced quite a bit more. As we did, I was amazed at how many things that had happened to me had been used to gradually and ever so slowly nudge me down the road that lead to this marvelous place. My dad’s death, my sons’ birth, the end of my first marriage, Carol’s entry into my life, and even watching Ella and Alex stick those rocks up their noses. It all started to make sense to me. But just as I started to get comfortable, my new friend spoke up again. “You’ve been on a long journey, but you’re not done yet. You still have a rather long way to go. Remember, you’re just in the yard of religion. Look behind you. The house of religion is right over there. And you still have to

step up on the porch, open up and walk through the door, and finally come on into the house. Everything we have talked about up to this point has simply been to get you ready for the rest of your journey. And it's going to be difficult especially the next part—stepping onto the porch of religion. For as your old friend John Wesley liked to say, the porch of religion is repentance. But that's for our next conversation. How about we just sit and share the rest of the day?"

So that's what we did. And what a marvelous day it was. We hung out in the yard for hours. The house was still beckoning me to come in, mind you. It was so inviting. Yet the whole idea of stepping onto the porch of repentance seemed a bit worrisome. For those of my generation, you see, repentance is not an inviting concept by any stretch of the imagination. But then I'm getting ahead of myself. That's for our next conversation. In the meantime I think I will simply stretch out the lawn for a bit more, take a little nap, and let you decide whether or not my adventure really happened or if your preacher is still on a sugar high from all of those Christmas cookies he ate.